Relic hunting makes history come alive

By Petey Husson

History is considered by some to be a dry, boring subject. But others look at it as a thread to the past, and want to know more about events and people, how they lived and felt.

Chris Christman is a local waterman. He majored in history at Christopher Newport College, then chose to work on the water. He and his wife, Jenny, have lived in Poquoson all their lives.

About six years ago, Chris discovered relic hunting and bought his first metal detector. Since then he has pursued his love of history and the desire to know more about his own family's part in the Civil War in addition to finding out more about the battles and effect of the war on Peninsula people.

Recently Chris spoke to several classes at Poquoson High School and displayed many of the artifacts he has collected over the past six years. Some he found himself and some he has bought or traded with other relic collectors.

He speaks often to civic groups and school classes not only to share his collection but to try and foster in others a sense of the importance of studying history through relics and the pure joy of the search and "the find."

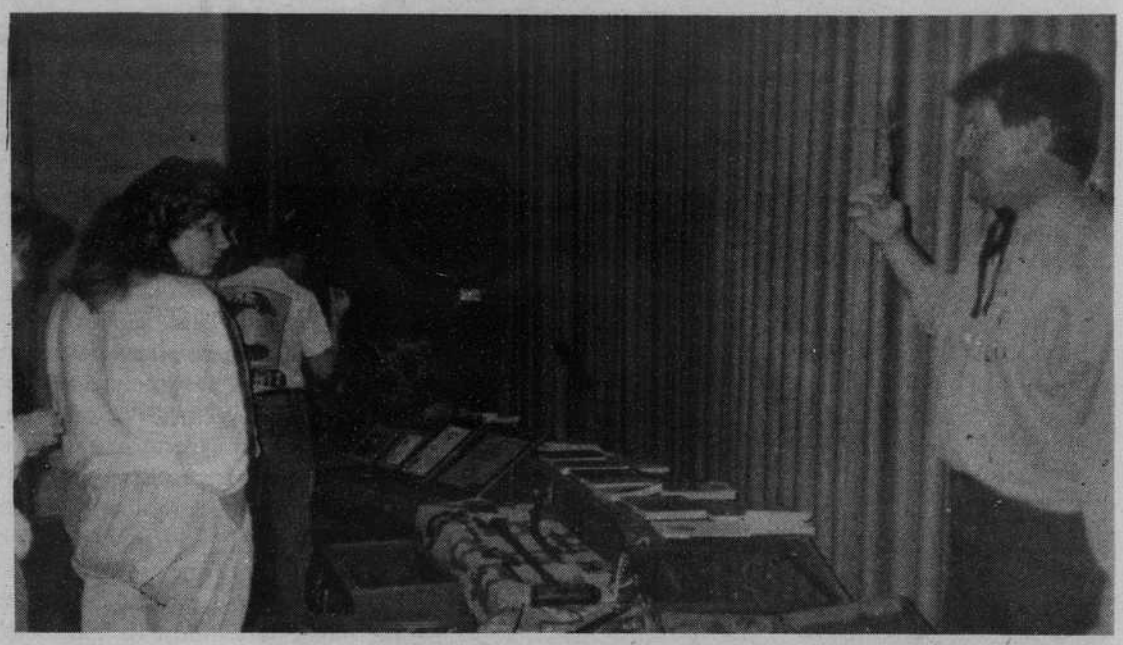
Listening to Christman brings the Civil War "home." His own relatives, Wesley Ward and George Washington Firth were involved in the Civil War. He has found indications of soldiers' presence in many places on the Peninsula.

The students seemed fascinated with the talk and in seeing the collection. It was like having a personal museum tour back in time. As he spoke, Christman donned various parts of the Confederate soldier's uniform and explained the differences in the buttons, cuffs and collars, as well as the formal and informal uniforms.

"Another soldier would know I was from Virginia from the buttons I wear," he explained. "On the button an I, a C or an A would show whether the soldier was in infantry, cavalry or artillery. The colors of cuffs and collar also showed this; blue represented infantry, gold for calvary and red for the artillery.

He brought life to a Confederate soldier, showing what they carried; a poncho, a musket, a "confederate pocketbook," a bag which contained a tin cup, tin plate, hardtack (he had some he had made himself five years ago) a knife and a day's rations. Each soldier would have a canteen since water was crucial. The pants, the shoes, the jacket, the hat; he spoke of each piece of the uniform, not simply explaining what it was for but giving his audience a sense that we were walking with the soldier in that camp. His strong Poquoson accent and relaxed, easy manner added to the reality of the portrait.

Christman didn't just take up the hobby of looking for things with his metal detector aimlessly. He has studied his own family history, going to the state archives to find names of "his kinfolk." He joined the Sons of Confederate Veterans and has sought out information of the 32nd Virginia group which camped on the Peninsula in 1861 and 1862. This militia included "Our People," from Poquoson, Yorktown, Hampton, Newport News and Williamsburg. He joined a re-enactment group which travels to various battlegrounds and re-enacts the actual battle based on historical accounts. He has gone to Fredericksburg and Richmond to seek out artifacts of campgrounds and battlefields. Also he buys and researches Civil War reference books, books of letters and journals of soldiers known to have camped here. The letters of long ago soldiers often give a more accurate history than some of the "erroneous" accounts of commonly accepted historical "fact."



Chris Christman displays his Civil War items at Poquoson High School. (photo by Petey Husson)

As he demonstrated how soldiers loaded their guns and how they approached the enemy, he showed the commands they would receive and how the soldier would look. He explained the probable reaction of the enemy as well, making the students more aware of how it was; "you have to remember, people were sick, no one was feeling very well, and you were getting shot at; cannons were going off and there was a lot of confusion and disorganization. So things didn't always go perfectly. Guns misfired and some even loaded bullets upside down. Even though the regiment was supposed to synchronize their loading and shooting procedures, it didn't always work that way."

He spoke of the pride people had then of being a part of the Confederacy. They didn't consider themselves rebels. They felt that they had the right to secede from the union. "People fought because they were invaded." This is still deep in the hearts of all those who live in the south.

Christman took the students briefly through the Peninsula campaign, explaining the first and second lines of defense, and the way Magruder tried to fool McClelland and the Union Army into believing that he had many more soldiers than were actually there.

Each of the relics he collects has a history, from the buckles and coins to the picture frames and hospital bullets given to men to bite down on during treatment. He likes to spend a couple of hours a week searching. He works on the water five days a week and divides his free time between his family and his hobby.

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